

# "TEEN MOM" TV SHOWS & STIGMA AROUND YOUNG PARENTS



Creators of reality shows such as *Teen Mom* and *16 and Pregnant* say they are intended to prevent young pregnancy and parenting, but their greatest effect may be to increase stigma on pregnant and parenting youth.

MTV's hit reality shows *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* were produced with an agenda of preventing teen pregnancy by displaying a carefully constructed image of early-age parenting. Analyses of this media have found that the structure and content of the series minimize social inequities that often underlie young parenting. Some health promotion groups have partnered with such shows to try to provide health education to young viewers.

## WHAT WE DID

This analysis was part of a larger study of the experiences of young parents in Western Canada.

Over the course of 4 years, we conducted a series of observations and 381 in-depth interviews with:

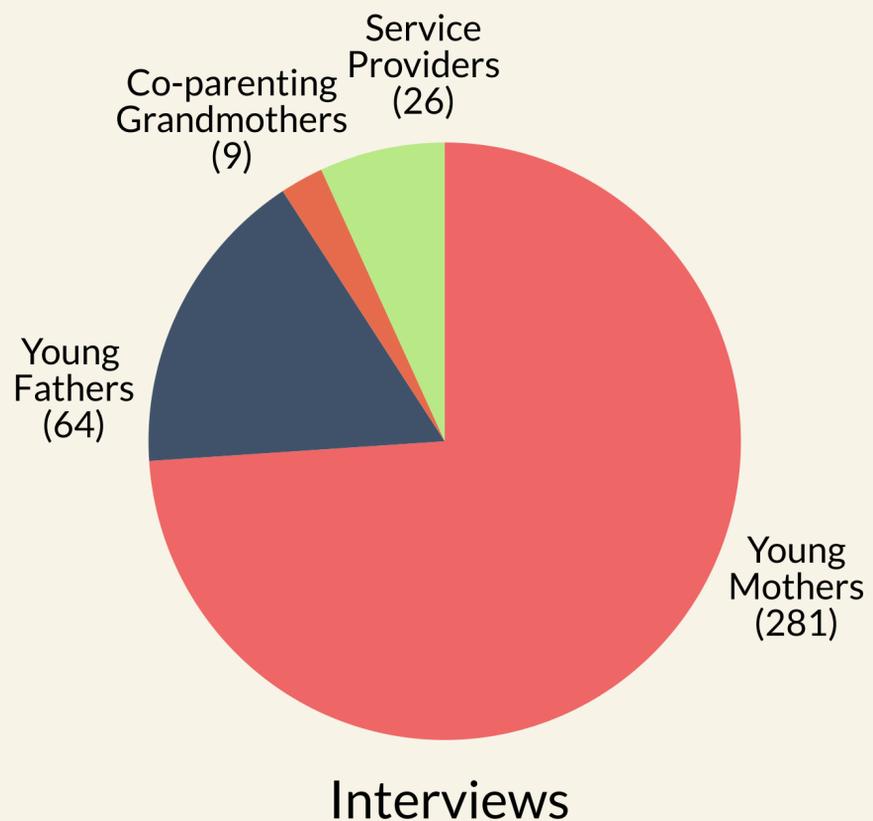
89 young mothers (age 15-25)

23 young fathers (age 17-29)

2 co-parenting grandmothers

25 service providers who worked with young parents.

Some observations and interviews took place in secondary programs for young parents.



**We didn't start out planning to ask about reality shows.** In early interviews, we asked, among many other questions, what images of young mothers and young fathers participants saw in the media.

Not only were *Teen Mom* and *16 and Pregnant* the first media representations of young parents to come to most participants' minds; they were **the only examples** most could think of.

"I used to watch [*Teen Mom*] 'cause it was gossipy and it was like, 'Oh my god, that's who gets pregnant?' [...] And I was just sort of like, 'Oh, I never want to be one of them.' So then finding out I was pregnant, I was like, 'Wow, I'm becoming one of them and that just sucks. Like, I failed, I'm... terrible.' And it was because, on that show—and I realize it now—if you watch it, like, there's a tone to it.

A negative tone."  
- Kim, Young Mother

# WHAT WE FOUND

1

Young parents found these shows to give **unrealistic** portrayals of what it is like to be a young parent.

2

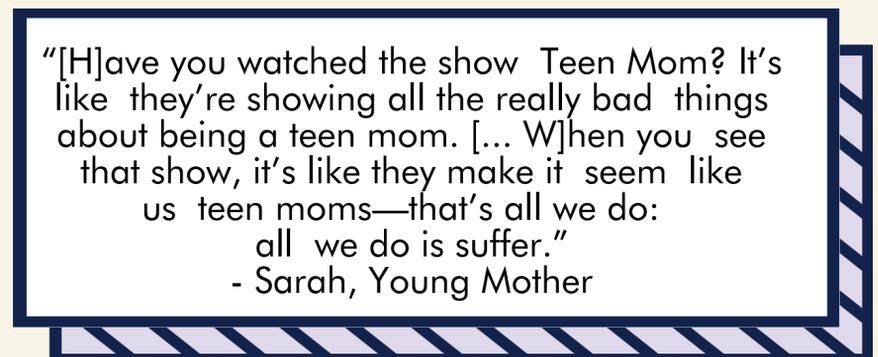
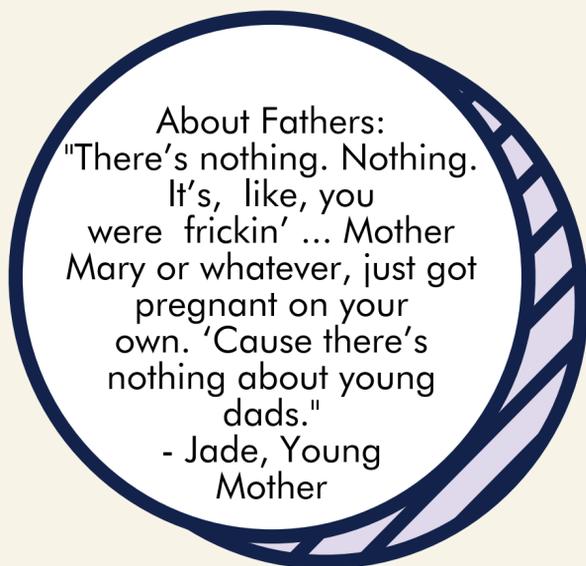
These shows **perpetuate negative stereotypes**: first that young mothers are lonely, irresponsible “party girls”, and also that young fathers are immature and absent parents.

3

Many young parents had stories of **stigma that they felt was related to this media**, either because of the common stereotypes, or because bullies would specifically mention these shows.

4

Young mothers who watched these shows themselves felt they did nothing to discourage pregnancy, and often experienced **self-stigma** when they themselves became pregnant.



Teen Mom style reality entertainment is pervasive in youth culture and built on the idea that stigmatizing young parenting is good for public health.

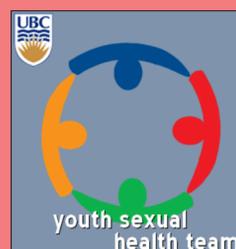
Young parents have highly negative and stigmatizing experiences tied to this media. Health promotion groups should reconsider partnerships that provide support or endorsement to such media.

**For more information on young parents and Teen Mom show stigmatization, please see:**  
Greyson, D., Chabot, C, & Shoveller, J.A. (2019). Young parents' experiences and perceptions of 'Teen Mom' reality shows.  
Journal of Youth Studies, DOI:10.1080/13676261.2019.1569605

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